

How to save seeds from your garden favorites

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Every year hobby gardeners ask about saving seed from their flowers and vegetables. By saving seed, they not only save a few dollars, but also keep favorite heirloom varieties available to other gardeners. While saving flower and vegetable seed is a rewarding experience, it also takes time and must be done right. Here are a few rules to remember when saving seed from some of your garden favorites this year.

Not every plant's seeds are worth keeping. Many cultivars available from seed companies are hybrids (that is, plants developed by crossing specific parent plants). Hybrid plants are wonderful but the seed is often sterile or will not reproduce true to the parent plant. Therefore, do not waste your time saving seed from hybrid cultivars.

What can you save? Standard or heirloom varieties that are not cross-pollinated by nearby plants are good candidates. Many gardeners successfully keep beans, tomatoes, lettuce, and peppers. Select only the best cultivars that produce the most vigorous plants and the finest crops. Choose disease-free plants with qualities you desire. Look for the most flavorful vegetables or beautiful flowers. Consider size, harvest time, and other characteristics.

Beans, peas, onions, carrots, corn, most flowers and herb seeds are prepared by a dry method. Allow the seed to mature and dry as long as possible on the plant. Complete the drying process by spreading on a screen in a single layer in a well-ventilated dry location. As the seed dries, the chaff or pods can be removed or blown gently away. An alternative method for extremely small or lightweight seed is putting the dry seed heads into paper bags that will catch the seed as it falls out.

Seed contained in fleshy fruits should be cleaned using the wet method. Tomatoes, melons, squash, cucumber, and roses are prepared this way. Scoop the seed masses out of the fruit or lightly crush fruits. Put the seed mass and a small amount of warm water in a bucket or jar. Let the mix ferment for two to four days. Stir daily. The fermentation process kills viruses and separates the good seed from the bad seed and fruit pulp. After two to four days, the good viable seeds will sink to the bottom of the container while the pulp and bad seed float. Pour off pulp, water, bad seed, and mold. Spread the good seed on a screen or paper towel to dry.

Once completely dry, your seeds are ready to store in a cool, dry, dark place. Put each seed type in a labeled, dated envelope and store the seed envelope in a sealed jar.

Moisture can cause the seeds to deteriorate more quickly. To ensure the seeds stay dry and increase seed viability, place a small amount of freshly opened powdered milk or silica gel in the jar beneath the seed packets. Close the jar tightly and store on the kitchen counter until no moisture condenses inside the jar. Then place the jar in the refrigerator until planting time.

Now for the local scoop: Join Barren County Extension and a vibrant group of Master Gardeners for our first annual Plant & Seed Swap event on Saturday, September 24th from 11:00am to 1:00pm at the Barren County Extension Office Auditorium located at 1463 West Main Street in Glasgow. The event is open to the public for those that have an interest in gardening and would like to exchange their plants/bulbs/seeds with other avid gardener's in the community. For more information and rules for the event, contact the Barren County Extension Service at 651-3818 or kristin.goodin@uky.edu.

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